



A 21st Century Dad's Blog

My sometimes hectic and wonderful life with 5 kids

Finn ... 7?

Posted September 19, 2010 by jimthelen

Categories: [Culture and Living](#)

Tags: [Birthdays](#), [Finn](#)

I feel like I need to introduce myself. Or at least *re-introduce* myself. To my blog.

"Hello, blog. It's me. Jim. It's been awhile."

(And in this alternate reality, where blogs talk ...)

"Yes, it has been. Where the heck have you been?"

As I rule, I don't respond to questions from sassy blogs. But in all honesty, this has been my longest absence from my blog ever — almost two months. I blame work and summer over-scheduling.

But shame on me for not posting a birthday blog on the day of Finn's birthday.

I decided the next best thing would be to still give Finn a birthday blog, and have it coincide with his family birthday party, later today at the Nelson's!

Happy 7th Birthday, Finn!

There is an advantage, of course, to having delayed this birthday posting for Finn. It's not like we haven't already had some birthday celebrations for Finn, and I have all of those pictures now to share!

I'll start with that.

A birthday starts, of course, when you wake up. So what better treat to wake up to than a birthday doughnut?

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Lighting the birthday, uh, doughnut

That's right. Seven candles. Finn — who has gone by the super-hero name "Finn 6" for quite some time now — is officially 7. But he's still "Finn 6" too. I know, I know. It's confusing. You sort of have to know about the Cartoon Network super-hero kid "Ben 10," who, with the slap of his hand on the top face of an over-sized, dime store plastic watch on his wrist, can transform into a number of different alien forms to save the world from various iterations of doomsday ... you can see how that would be the model for "Finn 6." And since "Finn 6" rolls off the tongue a bit easier than "Finn 7," I think it's staying. At least for now. We'll see. Super-hero personas change pretty fast at this age!

The first gifts were bestowed at breakfast after Finn blew out the candles on his birthday doughnut. After opening a sea turtle trinket (sea turtles still being a favorite of the birthday boy's), Finn got another current favorite — a Beast Quest series book. I won't take the time to explain those — another boy-super-hero-quest thing — but here's the picture:

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Finn was thrilled to get another "Beast Quest" series book



A reading from one of the birthday "Beast Quest" books

Next in sequence came Grandpa and Grandma Thelen's birthday

visit. Part of this included a trip to Target to pick out a new bike, as Finn has long outgrown his first bike, which, coincidentally, was a birthday gift on his 4th birthday.

Drum roll, please ... Finn's new bike:



Finn's new red racer bike -- he loves it!

Actually, as an aside, I have to wonder if Grandpa and Grandma Thelen feel like they're getting pigeon-holed or type-cast into the role of always buying birthday bikes (sort of like how you know Hugh Grant is always going to play the role of the affable, bumbling git in romantic comedy movies). If I'm counting right, this is the fourth time Grandpa and Grandma Thelen have bought one of our kids a birthday bike (if you count's Caroline's scooter when she turned 3 ... I digress ...).

We also had the treat of a visit from Aunt GG, Finn's godmother, who came bearing more birthday gifts.



Yay, Aunt GG was able to come over to visit

So today, we party with cousins Jonah and Chloe at their house (to also celebrate Chloe's birthday!). We can't wait to see them. It's been too long.

Finn, I can't believe you're 7 now. First grade. Seven. Learning to read and write. Already an absolute gentleman — kind, considerate, sensitive. I love that you can love sea turtles and want to save the planet at the same time you love smash-'em-up Wii games and pretend to destroy it. I love that you play equally well by yourself as much as with other kids. I love that you are comfortable with yourself, and that you have a rock-solid sense of what's right ... and what's not.

You are positively a joy in my life, Finn, because even as I see myself in you, you express yourself in such wholly unique and different ways that you give me a chance to see the world differently, and I learn more about myself in that, hopefully becoming a better dad in the process.



First day of First Grade

Don't ever change who you are, and who you are becoming, Finn. I love you just the way you are, no matter what.

Happy birthday party day!

Comments: [4 Comments](#)

Charlie's 3!

Posted July 22, 2010 by jimthelen

Categories: [Culture and Living](#)

Tags: [Birthdays](#), [Charlie](#)

A child's birthday in a big family is not just *his* birthday.

This morning, 3 years from the date Charlie landed in our family, Finn was so excited that he went up to Charlie's bedroom and woke him up just to be the first to wish him a happy birthday!

It's so fun, and heart-warming too, to see the other kids taking ownership of a sibling's birthday, and being excited for him.

And holy cow, by the way. Can you believe Charlie is 3???



Sunning himself recently in Florida



This just has "big boy" written all over it!



Charlie pretending to be a fierce lion at the zoo this summer

This last picture gives me a nice segue into my first description of my now-3-year-old tow-headed little wonder boy, Charlie. Fierce he is not. Fun-loving and playful, yes, but fierce, n-o. Indeed, when I play with the kids sometimes, and I take on the role of the growling scary monster that's chasing them through the house, the other (bigger) kids will run screaming bloody-murder through the house, and Charlie — oh, precious Charlie! — will stop in his tracks, turn to face me, and try to make peace with me.

"You're not a mean monster, you're a nice monster," Charlie says, confident in his psuedo-"music calms the savage beast" approach. (I think there's some other cliché involving vinegar and honey that might apply here too, but I digress ...)

So Charlie is the peace-maker — for the most part. He has his challenges with his closest siblings, both sisters, of course, but for the most part I'd just have to call his disposition sweet.

He's also fun, and funny. He loves gags and joking, and he's got the cutest little voice and vocabulary for it.



Old man Charlie and his BIG nose - compliments of a Wendy's kids meal

But Charlie's first and only love, I must admit, is cozy. Or rather, Cozy. There's no escaping the fact that Cozy deserves proper-name status and a C-A-P-I-T-A-L "C" in Charlie's life and our home. Cozy celebrates Charlie's up, and consoles his downs. Cozy sometimes serves as a hat (note the picture in the header above), and is almost never detached from Charlie's grasp. Cozy needs to be tucked in and said "G'night" to at na-night time, and when the kids personify their stuffed animal toys, Charlie personifies Cozy to keep up with them. Cozy is equally a member of our family as anyone in it, of this there is no doubt!

I'm so thrilled to be your Dad, Charlie. I love how you greet me when I come home from work ... making me sit down on the floor and wait in the entry way in the "mud room" as you go all the way to the other side of the house, line yourself up, and come charging back from the living room, through the kitchen, and into the mudroom to hit me with your full-running-force hug and knock me back to the floor, our legs all splayed up in the air, laughing until our sides hurt. And then you jump up and run back across the house, demanding that we do it again at least 3 more times. I hope I stay healthy enough for you to keep doing this with me for a long time — only I know it will get more dangerous, at least for me, as you get older, faster, bigger, stronger, funnier, and, hopefully, happier!

I love you, Charlie! Happy, happy, happy birthday to you!

Comments: [2 Comments](#)

Fun in the Sun (part III)

Posted July 17, 2010 by jimthelen

Categories: [Culture and Living](#), [Work-Life Balance](#)

Tags: [Pictures](#), [Traveling](#)

O.K., this'll be the last one. We're home now. Amen to scheduling the trip so we'd come home on a Friday and I'd still have a weekend before going back to work. Whew. I'm not ready to go back to work yet!

Now, where were we? Ahhh, yes. Naples. I had you caught up through our (last) Sunday beach trip and The Great Sea Turtle Rescue of '10.

We had lots more fun in the pool (more pictures below), although Finn's pool time was cut short a bit by a "swimmer's ear" ear infection that sent me to a 24-hour Walgreens at 2:45 a.m. one night when Finn couldn't sleep from ear pain. Poor guy. He had a bout with food poisoning or a 24-hour flu bug earlier in the trip too, so he definitely gets the "trooper" kid award for hanging in there through some crappy stuff.

We had some cute moments, like this morning when Caroline joined Michael in his bed to watch him play his DS:



I love when the kids want to hang out with each other



Finn soon joined the party on Michael's pillow

Another cute moment saw Petra make off with Charlie's "cozy" blanket, mimicking what she's sees Charlie do with his "cozy":



Petra does the "cozy on the head" routine ...



... that she learned by watching Charlie's pool-side routine



Another example of the "cozy on the head" routine Charlie has mastered

(By the way, we had a mild parental challenge on our hands to keep Charlie in line when he noticed that Petra had made off with his "cozy" ... the nerve of his little sister!)

We made a morning visit to the Naples Zoo, which we absolutely love. It has a great collection of animals — some of which you wouldn't see in a northern zoo — and native southern plants, trees, and the like.



The bear exhibit was new since our last visit to the Naples Zoo



Finn didn't realize you're not actually supposed to touch the python!



Alligator feeding from a safe distance - except the guy holding raw steak!

Uhhh, yeah. On that last one, you couldn't pay me enough to dangle

a raw steak over a hungry alligator's nose. The zoo keeper's counterpart who was narrating the alligator feeding show (not in the picture) insisted the alligator does not like the smell or taste of human flesh, and that alligators only bite or try to eat human flesh when they mistake it for something they usually eat, like fish or small animals. Yeah, right. Try telling that to the Naples-area guy who was coincidentally in the south Florida news literally the day before our zoo trip for having his hand bit off by an alligator. I'm not kidding — check it out: <http://www.naplesnews.com/news/2010/jul/11/alligator-attacks-man-florida-naples/>

Back to the safer environs of Grandma's pool ...

I would never say the kids get bored of the pool at Grandma Zech's house. However, one does notice the kids looking for more creative ways to enjoy the pool. Take Michael, for instance, who, after a week, was trying Houdini-like tricks with the plastic pool play rings:



Can Michael escape?



I'm pretty sure they won't be teaching this at swimming lessons next week!



Ta da -- he did it!

Michael also figured out a way to tie two pool surf boards together so

he could taxi people around the pool, like he did below with Kara and Caroline:



Free taxi rides around the pool, compliments of Michael!

Petra continued to enjoy being out at the pool with us:



Enjoying a pool-side popsicle party



Mastering the fine art of lounging by the pool

And although I don't have pictures to show for it — I know, I know, you can't believe I didn't capture pictures of something the kids did — both Caroline and Finn swam across the length of the pool ... UNDERWATER ... and Michael even managed to go back and forth across the pool underwater.

Charlie got braver too, venturing around the edge of the pool, all the way to the deep end, by holding the side of the pool. It's funny, I did that as a kid when I was learning, and that's how all of our kids have learned and gotten comfortable in the water at Grandma Zech's pool in Naples. Oh, and Charlie continued to jump into the pool with reckless abandon whenever he could get one of us to catch him:



9.9, 9.8, 9.9 perfect form, Charlie!

And speaking of jumping into the pool, Michael loved jumping in with whichever one of us he could talk into it:



Splash!

And Caroline loved jumping in too!



Usually she'd yell "Pig Pile" when she jumped in (it's a long story ...)

All of the kids love being around us whenever we were in the pool — case in point:



Awwww ... thumbs up is right!

And you know me, I insisted that we get a group shot on one of the occasions that all of us were in the pool together:



Thanks for taking the picture, Grandma -- one of our best ever!

Let's see ... what other fun did we have? Oh, there was the afternoon that Grandma Zech took Caroline out for a pedicure and manicure — Caroline (the younger one, ours) was quite proud to show off the results when she got back:



Very nice sparklies on your nails, Caroline! Thanks, Grandma Zech!

... and dinner out one night at local favorite Joe's Crab Shack (or, as Finn would say, "Hey, Joe, you're late!" Sorry, you probaby had to be there for that one ...):



Joe's Crab Shack is a seriously fun place -- the kids enjoyed it

We ended our Naples '10 vacation with lunch at the Naples Pier on our last full day there:





Michael and I coincidentally picked out the same outfit for our outing!

We were treated to another sea turtle sighting, as well as this dolphin:



This dolphin swam near the end of the pier

Moments like these are definitely memory-worthy. It never ceases to amaze me how the random collection of people standing together at the end of the Pier will collectively hold their breaths and gasp with quiet satisfaction when a dolphin surfaces, or a sea turtle. At our human core, we all appreciate the beauty of nature like this, and it doesn't cost a penny (well, ignoring the plane tickets, rental car, absurdly expensive parking at the Detroit airport ... but I digress!) to see it. The kids see and appreciate it too, even down to almost-16-month-old Petra, who saw and coo'd at this dolphin when I pointed it out to her.

I'm glad we have these vacation traditions with the kids, and I'm glad Kara and I were able to give them another summer of it. A zillion thanks to Grandma Zech for sharing her home (and time and patience) with us during our 9-day stay there.

Here's hoping there can be a Naples '11 visit in our future!

Comments: [2 Comments](#)

Fun in the Sun (part II)

Posted July 14, 2010 by jimthelen

Categories: [Culture and Living](#), [Work-Life Balance](#)

Tags: [Pictures](#), [Traveling](#)

O.K. I'll dispense with the usual attempt at a snappy intro and get right back to where I left off.

It was Sunday morning. I closed down at the Radio Road Starbucks to get home to get ready for church. Church we did. After, and after some time in the pool, lunch, and Petra's nap, we loaded the kids up for our annual trip to our favorite Naples ice cream store, Regina's. There's something great about having traditions like this — the older kids remember the place from year to year, and their excitement at going trickles down to the younger ones like, well, ice cream melting down a cone faster than a little kid can slurp it up.

All right, I'll stop with the philosophy and get right to the pictures!



Finn hit the hook at least 6-7 times!

You who have been to Naples and Regina's know of the ring toss game. Finn, Kara, Michael, and Caroline all tried their hand at it. Michael was the most successful (4 ringers — a record for one visit), and Finn was the most dogged (hitting the hook with the ring at least 7 times, but never a ringer ... great effort, Finn!).

And there's the ice cream, enjoyed by all:



The lens lined up at the eating counter!



It's nice to be in a picture for a change — thanks, Kara!



Charlie enjoys “red white & blue” flavor — whatever that is!

After Regina’s, we opted for a quick stop at the beach, where I got the picture for the current background header for my title pane at the top of the page, and these other gems:



The kids check out the surf



Even Petra got her feet wet!



Caroline was quick to lose some clothes for better wave surfing!



Timing the next wave to perfection!



Finn and Michael enjoying the salty surf

The kids enjoyed this quick trip to the beach so much that Kara and I decided to make a real trip of it the next day. Grandma agreed to stay with Petra so Kara and I could enjoy the bigger kids and the surf instead of dealing with Petra eating beach sand.

The real beach trip was what it always is — just incredible. There's something about communing with the waves, surf, and sun. The kids are entranced by the rhythm of the waves coming in.

But there I am, getting all philosophical again, when you just want to see the pictures!



Planning the perfect sand castle



Mama loves son loves Mama ...



Caroline discovers a beached white whale ... 😊



Daddy and Charlie brave the deeper surf



Kara always gets the best snapshots of Michael at the beach!

By far the bigger story of our beach trip, however, was coming upon a large sea turtle that had gotten snagged in a fisherman's line off the Naples Pier. Finn, lover of sea life and sea turtles in particular, was beside himself, with concern for the sea turtle and the general excitement of it all. Daddy was there with camera, of course, to memorialize the event.



The concern on the Pier for the sea turtle's well being was evident



The sea turtle surfaces right under us

We hope the ultimate story was of a great sea turtle rescue. Another fisherman showed up with a net to coax the sea turtle close enough to shore for someone to wade out and free him of the fishing line.



The sea turtle rescue begins

Sadly, we couldn't stick around to watch the entire rescue. Our parking meter time was up, and we had gotten stung the day before with a \$32 Naples parking ticket for parking at a permit-only spot, so we didn't want to risk a second contribution to the Naples city treasury. Given the options, we probably should have stuck around to see what happened with the turtle. He seemed to be in good hands with the fisherman who was taking him to shore to complete the rescue, however, and Finn was satisfied that all that could be done was being done.

It sure was an eventful day at the beach!

(O.K., time again to head for home to see the kids up to start another day in Naples — only 2 more days before our return trip home! Probably enough time to take enough new pictures for a Part III of this series, so watch for one more after this!)

Comments: [2 Comments](#)

Categories: [Culture and Living](#), [Work-Life Balance](#)

Tags: [Pictures](#), [Traveling](#)

Ahhhh, Naples.

Bad Internet connection at Grandma's house. Stuck in a local Starbucks using ATT free Wi-Fi. Sipping a grande mocha. Listening to Nora Jones in the background.

Life is pretty rough.

And I have 15 minutes before I told Kara I'd be back to help get the kids up and ready for church before (possibly) heading out to the beach this morning.

Thus, I'm left with precious little time to share pictures and "the story" of our trip so far.

First — the flight down. Daddy + all 5 kids by myself — and Grandma too. Kara flew down separately (long story related to her work ...), and was able to join us by midnight.

It actually went very smoothly.



Grandma's version of "Adventure Travel"

I always get a chuckle at the stares we get when traveling with all 5 kids. It's as if people look at us, shake their heads, and wonder what we were thinking. It happened this time at the Detroit Metro airport McDonalds and several times on the plane ride down.

I personally think they're jealous. They have a sense that it must be a blast to have 5 kids and travel to Florida with them. 😊

Back to Florida.

And the traditional jump in the pool in your clothes the moment we get there:



Caroline was in the pool before I had the luggage in the house!



Finn was second in the pool, going straight to the deep end.



Michael's "in your clothes" jump into the pool

We've done some of our traditional things already:

— lots of time in the pool:



Caroline's best pool-side pose



Finn's a jumping blur!



Michael and Finn's late-night swim waiting for Kara the first night



Mama's so proud of Charlie ...



Ahhh, the joy of the kiddie pool!



Petra learns how to lounge by the pool



Charlie can't get enough jumps into my arms



There's nothing like swimming with your biggest brother

— a visit to the Shell Shack, which has just an overwhelming inventory of shell- or sea-related trinkets:



Kara and Michael check out a shell-studded belt



The one that almost got away ...

Stay tuned for the next installment of Fun in the Sun ... (in other

words, if I don't shut down and leave to head back to Grandma's now, we might be late for Sunday morning church ...!)

Comments: [6 Comments](#)

Mr. Cobra Goes to Washington

Posted May 30, 2010 by jimthelen

Categories: [Parenting](#), [Work-Life Balance](#)

Tags: [Finn](#), [Traveling](#)

No, you're not suffering from *de ja vu*. You *have* read this title before.

Well, sort of. Only it involved a praying mantis. Since I don't want to assume you've forgotten everything behind the praying mantis version of this story, I'll give you the one-sentence refresher:

Dad takes son's favorite toy/stuffed animal with him on business trip and takes pictures of said toy/stuffed animal sight-seeing around said business trip destination.

So this year, this past week, it was the same kid (Finn), same business trip (to D.C. for a meeting at the U.S. Chamber of Commerce), only a different (current) favorite toy: a wooden moving cobra that came in Finn's Easter basket a few months ago.



Cobra on the subway ride into D.C.

Avid readers of this blog — or at least those with particularly good memories — may remember more pictures of praying mantis last year seeing more of Washington. I'm a bit embarrassed to say that cobra was a bit more of a home-body. He hardly left the hotel room for much of my 36-hour trip. Of course, who could blame him? The room had a great view:



Day-dreaming of being the most powerful cobra in the western world

(In fact, speaking of great views, when cobra first walked ... er, correction, slithered into the hotel room, he (and Finn's dad) were treated to the spectacle of President Obama's *Marine One* helicopter bringing the president himself back to the White House:)



A quick-thinking cobra found his camera to snap this shot

Final note on this particular picture ... cobra couldn't get in the picture. Finn's dad was too afraid the sharp-shooters on the White House roof, who appeared to be watching him through binoculars, might misinterpret his raising the cobra to the hotel room window as a hostile act.

So back to the hotel. It's not that cobra was stuck in the room for the whole trip. He did get out to stretch his scales in the grass by the sidewalk outside the hotel:



Feels about the same as Michigan grass, cobra decided

He did get out for a morning Starbucks run:



Cobra thought D.C. espresso was a bit more bitter than in Michigan

And he did get out to sight-see a little bit, checking out the Andrew Jackson statute in Lafayette Square park across from the White House:



"If only I could ride a horse, I could be famous too," cobra thought.

And cobra got down to the White House too, but was denied a visit with President Obama ...



Cobra asked me if there would be mice to catch in the White House.

I have to say, this was a different trip for cobra than what praying mantis experienced a year earlier. Praying mantis wanted to see as much of D.C. as he could. Cobra was more, well, cerebral. He wanted to know more about history:



"With malice for none, with charity for all ..."

And I have to say too, I think cobra drank a bit too much of the D.C. Kool-Aid, as he started getting caught up in the trappings of what he could do if he lived in D.C. ...



Cobra imagines a different life in D.C.

In the end, the 36-hour trip was over too soon, and cobra was headed back home to Finn.



Cobra prefers life close to the ground, flying only when he must.

I think the fun part for me comes in the various ways the kids react to my trip. I'm not gone overnight for business very much — thankfully — so when I am, the kids wonder where I've gone. I tell them "to Washington, D.C.," but of course that doesn't mean much to them at this point (other than Michael). They know who Barack Obama is, however, so I give it to them with that context reference point: "I'm going to the city where President Obama lives, and I'm going to see his house, which is called 'the White House,'" I tell them.

Bless little Charlie's heart. He had this vague recollection, apparently, of what I'd told him about where I was going, and who lived there. When I called home from the airport to let Kara know that my flight home would be on time, I heard Charlie asking Finn in the background, "Is that Barack Obama on the phone? Is Daddy at the White House still?"

What I wouldn't give to let the kids keep their fantasies about their dad's importance far longer than they will ...!

Comments: [4 Comments](#)

Running in the Family

Posted May 2, 2010 by jimthelen

Categories: [Culture and Living](#)

Tags: [Kara](#), [Michael](#), [Milestones](#)

I wrote here recently about Michael taking up some interest in running, spurred on by Kara's training for a half-marathon that she completed (in record time) in Kalamazoo last weekend. Michael's interest piqued at just the right time for Kara, *Wonder Woman of Running* and of *My Life*, to suggest they run in a race together. MSU's "Heart of a Spartan" 5k charity race offered a compelling venue — run the race through the streets of East Lansing and campus, and finish down the tunnel and out over the 50-yard line on the football field at

Spartan Stadium.

If that weren't incentive enough, Michael may have found the remaining will and strength he needed to slog his legs through the rain-soaked 5,000 meters (3.1 miles) this morning in the knowledge that my pictures of his running feat would land him in my blog.

(Conversation last night:)

"Daddy, you haven't done a new blog in a while."

"You're right, Michael. I've been waiting for your race with Mama tomorrow so I can take pictures and put them in my blog for you."

"Cool."

'Nuff said. So here's my pictorial tribute to Michael's hard work to finish the first running race of his life — a 5k at 9 years old. I can tell he's as proud of it as we are of him. How? He took his race number — 2121 — with him so he can talk about it at "Show and Share" with his 3rd grade classmates.



Michael (orange jacket/hood) and Kara set off on their rainy run

I was fortunate to get this picture. Finn, Caroline, and Grandpa Thelen were with me peering out from the 3rd level of the parking ramp near the starting line, trying to avoid the steady rain, and feeling lousy at searching unsuccessfully for Kara and Michael in the pre-race registration area. I happened to notice Michael's orange coat through my zoom lens as I scanned the crowd of runners starting the race, and was lucky to get a few shots in focus as they took off.



Down the tunnel, through the end zone, heading up the football field ...



Thirty yards to the finish line!

Having missed a picture of Kara pumping her fists as she crossed the finish line in her half marathon last weekend, I was positioned and ready to get the finish line pictures this morning:



You did it, Michael -- congratulations!



All the way through the finish line ...



Michael notices their finish on the Spartan Stadium scoreboard

I was so happy for Kara to experience the pride and joy of running alongside Michael for the race. She was his training inspiration, and thus a fitting race partner for him. I caught some of this feeling in the next few pictures, marred only by other runners stepping in between me and them periodically ...



I see "Accomplishment!" written all over Michael's post-race face



Kara's congratulatory hug envelopes Michael



This was a left shoulder away from being a near-perfect picture

And finally, kudos to other friends and neighbors who ran the race, including good friends Jeff and Kristin, and neighbors Kris and Maddie:



(L to R) Kristin D., Michael, Kara, Maddie D., Kris D.

* * * * *

Michael, I'm so proud of you. You ran a hard race in the rain this morning and accomplished something that many people will never even try. You did it with guts and grace, and I hope you felt the pride and happiness that you deserve for yourself when you crossed the finish line this morning. You'll have lots more finish lines ahead of you – some in races of one kind or another, most just in daily living – and I hope you cross them all with your fists pumping in the air, proud of accomplishing the goals you set for yourself.

Comments: [6 Comments](#)

The Cousins

Posted April 11, 2010 by jimthelen

Categories: [Culture and Living](#)

Tags: [Cousins](#), [Pictures](#)

It's a pretty plain title, but I think it gets the job done. I'm told that when Jonah and Chloe get the itch to see our 5 kids, they ask when they're going to see "*The Cousins*" next.

"The Cousins" ... like it's a franchise or institution or something.

As for why this blog, and why now, well, it comes by request. The last time "the cousins" were all together at Grandma's house, I chaperoned them to the playground, with my camera in tow. As I started snapping pictures, Chloe asked, "Uncle Jim, are you going to put those pictures on your blog?"

Chloe, ever the opportunist.

"Would you like me to, Chloe?" I responded, breaking the *don't-answer-a-question-with-another-question* rule slightly.

"Sure, that would be great," came back the reply. Chloe's so polite.

So here it is. My blog and picture tribute to “The Cousins.”

But rather than limit myself to a slideshow of pictures from our playground trip last weekend, I decided to go back to the very beginning — to when Jonah and Chloe first met Michael for a short play-date at Kara’s house. Remember these?



April 2002 - Michael, Jonah, and Chloe meet for the first time



Playing together at Kara's house

A year later, they were still playing together, only Jonah and Chloe had gotten roped into Michael's "Singin' in the Rain"-themed play.



Umbrella play in Naples



Life revolved around umbrellas in those days



Grandpa Zech making it "rain"



A little bed-top "Ring Around the Rosie"

By this time, Kara and I had gotten married, of course. Jonah and Chloe were part of that too.



Ring-bearer Jonah, Flower girl Chloe



The flower swing where everyone had to take a picture

Since then, as you all well know, there have been multiple births in our family. Jonah and Chloe were among the first visitors for Finn, Caroline, Charlie, and Petra, usually within days of their births, if not in the hospital before our kids even came home.



Chloe meets baby Finn



Meeting baby Caroline at the hospital



Thumbs-up from Jonah for 1-week-old Charlie



Chloe's quite proud of her 1-week-old cousin Charlie

(Sorry, Jonah and Chloe ... no hospital pictures with Charlie. You'll have to take that up with your Mom, as maybe she remembers why she and your Dad came to the hospital to see us and Charlie without you ...)

And last, but certainly not least, came baby Petra, and conveniently on a weekend to make a hospital visit quite easy!



Good thing there were no limits on the number of visitors at one time!



The perfect swaddling hold for baby Petra



Ditto for Chloe

After this, I quite honestly don't know how to keep this short — there are so many pictures, so many memories together to choose from! I'll try to lump them by themes, I guess. And don't worry, Chloe ... I'll still have pictures from last weekend's trip to Grandma's playground.

For starters, it's fun to see how the cousins have grown up together. Here's a random chronological collection of groups shots that I asked them to pose for:



Together for Caroline's baptism (July 2006)



April 2007



August 2007



August 2008



October 2008



November 2008



Memorial Day 2009



October 2009

And finally, an iconic group Christmas 2009 picture of "The Cousins":



Merry Christmas 2009

"The Cousins" have spent holidays together, among them:



Christmas morning 2004 in Naples



Playing together with Santa's 2004 Naples deliveries



Trick-or-treating together, Halloween 2006



Surveying Easter baskets, Easter morn 2010

They've vacationed together ...



Up north to Platte Lake together (August 2008)



Naples 2004



Naples 2009

And then there's the sleep-overs ...



A July 2006 sleep-over



A September 2008 sleep-over



Ready for a post-birthday party sleep-over (January 2010)



The morning-after breakfast (following a January 2010 sleep-over)

Jonah and Chloe are good sports when I pull out my camera. Jonah usually wants me to get him in an action shot ...



Stone-skipping on vacation up north (August 2008)



One-handed, one object juggling



Leaping off a perfectly safe swing (April 2010)

... while Chloe is more likely to let me try my hand at amateur portraits of her:



August 2007



August 2009



April 2010

When they play together, it often involves water, in either its liquid or frozen form:



Platte Lake (August 2008)



A visit to the Naples splash park (July 2009)



Rockford snow piles (February 2009)



DeWitt snowperson-making (February 2010)



Water ballooning (June 2009)



Water sliding (June 2009)



Water and bubble play, Impression 5 Science Center (January 2010)



More bubble play



Birthday party at Frankenmuth Splash Village (February 2009)

When they're in activities, they support each other, showing up to cheer each other on:



Jonah gets his black belt (November 2009)



Michael and Finn finish karate camp (July 2009)



Gathered for Michael's First Communion (May 2009)

They return favors to each other, reciprocating, for example, various types of personal care:



Chloe paints Charlie's toenails (January 2010) ...



... and fingernails (December 2009) ...



... so Charlie returns the favor, combing Chloe's hair (April 2010)

They celebrate birthdays and baptisms ...



Finn's 5th birthday party pinata



Petra's baptism (June 2009)



Together for Caroline's 4th birthday (April 2010)

I think it's safe to say that my kids grow up loving "The Cousins" from early in their lives ...





... and Jonah (August 2008)

There's no obvious or simple way to bring this to a close — I could go on *almost forever*, as I have hundreds more pictures that would amply show how much they enjoy being together. I'm glad that I have all of the pictures, if only to give them, from time to time like this, a celebration of the memories they've made together as they're growing up.

The Cousins. What a wonderful gang of great kids. Lucky us.



The playground picture that inspired this blog - good suggestion, Chloe!

Comments: [6 Comments](#)

Sweet Caroline

Posted April 6, 2010 by jimthelen

Categories: [Culture and Living](#)

Tags: [Birthdays](#), [Caroline](#)

Daddy: I love being your Daddy, Caroline.

Caroline: Awww, thanks, Dad. I love being your grand-daughter.

I don't expect Caroline to fully appreciate or understand generational relationships in a nuclear family at the tender age of 4 years old. And in any event, the above quote, from my telephone conversation this morning with Caroline to wish her a happy birthday, goes down in our family history books as one of the sweetest things my oldest *daughter* has ever said to me. 😊

But more to the point, Caroline's 4. Today. Hooray for Caroline, and happy birthday to you, my precious pig-loving princess-of-a-daughter!

To my last point, I thought a fitting tribute for Caroline had to start with her pigs.

Caroline's pigs — a collection of 4 pink Boynton stuffed pigs — have been a mainstay in her life for nearly 70 percent of it. The first known picture (in my collection of thousands!) of Caroline with a pig dates back to July 2007, when Caroline was the tender age of 15 months:



Caroline at 15 months

There are no formal names for the pigs — they collectively go by "Pigs," or, individually, "Pig," except for her one favorite in the bunch, who is a bit more equal than the others because her tail is straighter, and who is sometimes referred to as "New Pig," or, inexplicably, "Suhve" (not even sure how to explain that one phonetically, except to suggest that you think of the word "of" and put an "s" in front of it ... I digress.)

Where Caroline goes, pigs go. What Caroline does, pigs do.

Pigs sleep with Caroline ...



A few nights after Christmas 2008

They wake up with her ...



Good morning, pigs and Caroline!

They lounge with her ...



This is one of Kara's all-time favorite pictures of Caroline

... pose with her ...



A contemplative Caroline at 26 months

... and play with her:



Enjoying spring 2010, days from her 4th birthday

What pigs do for Caroline on some ethereal level only she could fully explain, but I'll attempt it nonetheless. Pigs are her security blanket, her comfort. They stop her tears more surely than we can dry them. They put her to sleep better than any handful of Caldecott Medal-winning books. Some day she will stop nuzzling with their ears, paws, and tails, but I hope it's not soon.

Caroline is a famous dresser, and she generally chooses her own outfits these days. In her periodic princess phases, she's been known to sleep fully decked out in princess garb, as this picture shows of how she came downstairs from waking up one morning over Christmas last year:



Caroline waking up in full princess regalia

She may not always go for the full princess get-up; sometimes she tones it down and just goes with one subtle article to convey her interest in princessly things. Like the lipstick-lips boots here:



Love the toes ... love the toes!

She's been known to include Charlie in her dress-up too, though only if she has the more complete ensemble going, as the next two pictures illustrate:

Full princess get-up for Caroline, a mere felt hat for Charlie



Full Halloween get-up for Caroline, nothing but a bandana for Charlie

And then there was the time she let Finn talk her into Super-hero

pajamas (note too that “pig” was never far away):



Superman and Bat-Woman monitor the neighborhood for crime

By either the sheer force of her photogenic personality or plain 'ole coincidence, Caroline has been the subject of some of my favorite kid pictures ever taken. Among them are this classic from when Caroline was just over 20 months old ...



One of my favorite pictures of all time

... and this picture of a soon-to-be-embrace with big brother Michael:



A big brother-little sister hug-in-the-making

Through it all, over these last four years, I think it's her smile that's been the most constant, so effusive, so simple, so pretty:



So happy, so pretty



6 months old



1 year old -- OK, this smile's sort of cheesy!



2 years old ... back to so simple, so pretty



On the cusp of 4, and still a million-dollar smile



Officially at 4 ... still smiling

She's a bold and beautiful girl, sometimes a bit too independent! She really seems happy with her place in the world and our family. She's been a vital part of the circle of our family from the beginning, whether her older brothers were taking care of her ...



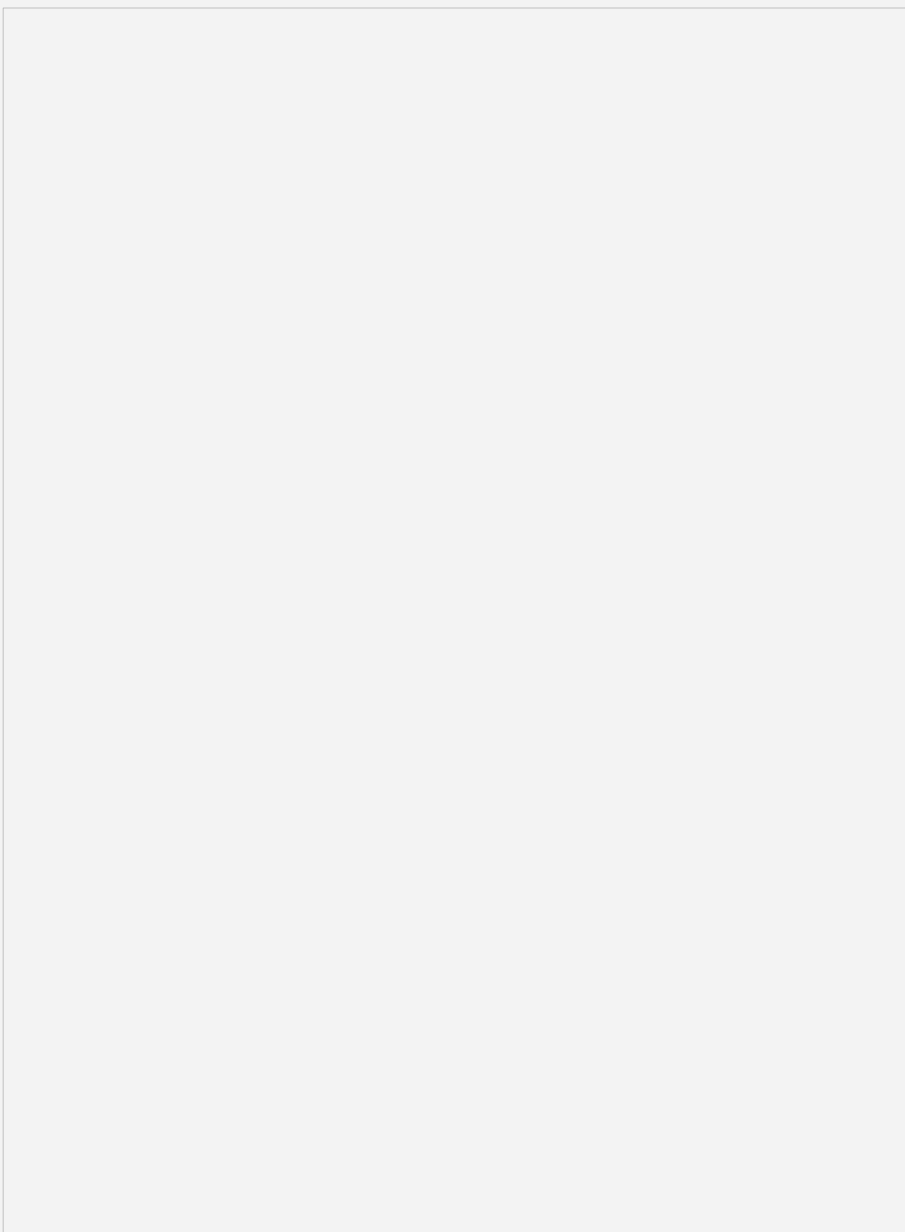
Taking care of each other as Caroline approached 1

... or she was just in on the play ...



Group hug with Charlie and Finn

... or she was learning the ropes as a big sister herself:



Big sistering Petra -- with pigs close by

We love your smile, Caroline, and your humor and independence too (mostly!). We love that you can love bugs and mud in your princess tiaras. We love that your heart is open to us, and that it's so happy too. We love being your parents, and your siblings too. While there might be moments of frustration in your most independent moments, the days, weeks, months, and now 4 years of joy that you have poured into our hearts will sustain us forever!

Happy, happy, happy, happy birthday to my darling grand-dau, ...
oops, daughter!



I love you, Caroline!

Love,

Daddy

Comments: [5 Comments](#)

Our Last First

Posted March 27, 2010 by jimthelen

I have yet to miss a birthday tribute to one of my kids in these last two years of my blog life, and Petra will be no exception today. We'll party next week, but today is "the day."

Happy No. 1 to our beautiful baby Petra, officially baby no more!

Wow. For the first time in four years, Kara and I will *not* have a less-than-1-year-old in the house!

About this time last year, I was driving Kara to the hospital for the slightly earlier-than-expected arrival of our last child. You may recall that we had scheduled an induction for 8:00 a.m. on the last Friday in March last year, and that Petra's little arrival alarm clock actually rang all by itself about 4 hours before that, sending us to the hospital for Petra's 10:42 a.m. arrival all by herself! (Kara would have me note here, of course, that she played a pretty significant role in Petra's arrival that morning too — not me, at least not that day ... my role that day was pretty much limited to a cross between a get-away driver and a glorious errand boy!)

So how can I sum up Petra's first year on the planet?

Well, how 'bout by nicknames, for starters? That would at least tell you a bit about how easily she fits into our family. Consider these:

Pettie (an early and still favorite)

Pettie-co (a favorite of Michael's, and his creation, if memory serves me correctly)

Pettie-coat Junction (isn't there some book or TV show or movie by this name?)

P-K Droid (a more recent favorite of Michael's)

Petra-kazola (I'm thinking this was Caroline's, and surely one Grandpa Zech himself might have come up with)

Pettie-K

Pepsi-Cola (a more recent favorite of mine, derived from Petra-cola and *not* meaning to suggest soft drink preferences in our house)

P.K. (a favorite of godmother Aunt Gretchen's)

Petra Nemcova (rarely used, but with a tip of our hats to Petra's namesake)

Petch-ra, or *Petwa* (not really nicknames, technically speaking, but it's just cute how Charlie says her name sometimes, and I wanted to have a memory of it!)

Jelly (yes, "Jelly," coined by Finn because he thinks she's currently about the size of a large jelly fish)

Or, I could look back over my collection of monthly pictures, a tradition we keep to memorialize how each child looked on each

month “birthday” during their first years. That would give you sort of the photo-journalism view of Petra’s last 365 days.



Birth



1 month



2 months



3 months



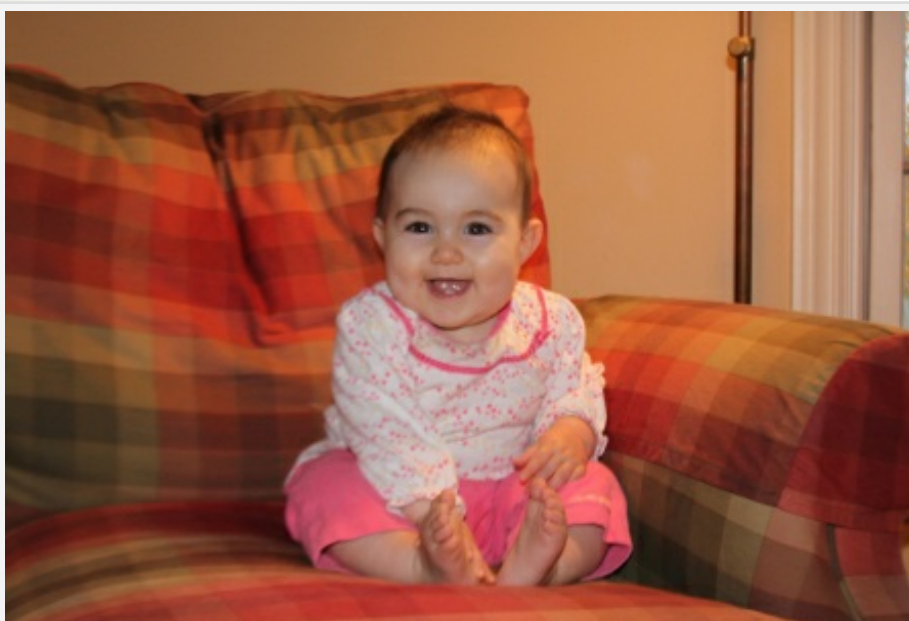
4 months



5 months



6 months



7 months



8 months



9 months



10 months



11 months

(I hope you understand that not even I, camera-freak Dad, could have gotten her 12-month picture yet, given that she's still up in her crib this fine morning ...)

From a vitals standpoint, she's got 8 teeth, she can sort of say "Dada," "Mama" (yes, "Dada" came first — score one for me!), and "ba-ba" (for her nightly bottle), and she waves like a mad dog whenever she has the sense that someone's about to leave the room or house, or if she sees a car driving away from the house.

She's REALLY close to standing and even walking by herself, and, despite not having a complete vocabulary at her disposal, she makes it very clear for us when she wants — no, *expects* — us to guide her in walks around the house, as these pictures show:



Uh, hello, big brother? Waiting for you to walk me around ...



First efforts at standing



Thanks, Finnie -- you're a sport!



You rock, Mama -- thanks for the walk!

She now takes baths with all of her siblings in the “big kids” bath tub:



She LOVES the big-kid bath

... loves playing with all of her brothers and sister:



Typical Saturday morning play in the basement



Mini basketball with Charlie



Sharing the stamp pad with Caroline

... and she's crazy, in particular, about playing with big brother Finnie:



Finnie loves to "love her up"

And at the end of the day, she'll always be my baby girl. I still have to pinch myself that we got our last girl. I still feel gratitude for Kara's deference to my name choice for Pettie — I consider that a special gift and honor to have so directly defined my baby girl's identity. (And I still make no apologies to Grandma Zech, who regularly poo-poo'd my name choice when Pettie was in utero, which I happily and teasingly told her only emboldened me and convinced me further of the rightness of my choice!)



Always and forever Daddy's little girl

We love watching your personality emerge, Petra. We love your eagerness and excitement to get outside as you experience the coming spring for the first time. We love your eyes, your dimples, your smile, the softness of your hair, the smell of your skin, the happiness you bring to our hearts. For you, always ever after we will say you made our family — finally — complete.

I love you, Pepsi-Cola!

Daddy

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